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SUBJECT: UNIVERSITY STUDENTS SKEPTICAL ABOUT UPCOMING ELECTIONS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Many Congolese university students, particularly in the capital, have little faith in the elections or the transparency of the electoral process. Many say they see scant benefit in voting in an election when the outcome is assumed to be already set. Others say they have little incentive to vote or become involved in the political process, except to protest the lack of transparency. Many feel powerless to bring about a new democracy, yet they welcome fora to speak openly about their concerns. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) In April and May 2006, three PolOffs led discussions about the coming elections at four Congolese universities in Kinshasa and Kisangani. The visits, arranged by the PD section, were intended to gain insight into students' opinions about the upcoming elections and to provide fora for Congolese students to express their views about the electoral process. The discussions also provided PolOffs the opportunity to clarify aspects of the DRC's constitution and electoral law, which very few students have read, as well as to highlight USG assistance to the overall electoral process.

To Vote or Not To Vote

¶3. (SBU) Many students claimed they will not vote in the upcoming election because they feel that the results of the election had already been determined, at least at the presidential level. They alleged that there is "support" from the international community for one particular candidate - namely, President Kabila. They expressed doubt that the electoral system was free, fair or transparent, and they felt that those parties in power were disadvantaging or excluding other political parties. Students saw the credibility of the elections as tarnished by involvement of the international community, and cited recent Liberian elections as a negative example of international intervention in influencing results.

Dissenting Views About the UDPS

¶4. (SBU) There are opposing views in Kisangani and Kinshasa about Etienne Tshisekedi's Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS). Traditionally, UDPS support has been strongest in the Kasais and in Kinshasa. Thus, at the University of Kisangani, there appeared to be little sympathy for either the party's positions, or for delaying the elections. By contrast, in Kinshasa there

was evidence of much support of the UDPS's position. Many of the students pushed for the inclusion of the UDPS, either through reopening voter registration or through a new political "dialogue." There were also militant sentiments expressed; one student at the University of Kinshasa (UniKin) stated that, if the UDPS were not included in elections, the "17,000 MONUC troops wouldn't be enough to keep the UDPS down."

Freedom of Information, Security, and Free Speech

¶15. (SBU) Students decried a general lack of information about the candidates and poor media coverage. (Note: The official campaign period does not begin until June 29. End note.) Students were worried about insecurity and the threat posed by armed groups, particularly in the eastern part of the country, but also by private security forces of certain candidates. One student at ISTA, a vocational school in Kinshasa, commented, "To speak and be heard in the DRC you need a gun." Some students argued that unless the brassage, or integration, of the military was complete, the elections could not move forward. There were fears about the potential of candidates' inability to accept defeat leading to violence after results are announced.

¶16. (SBU) Students also voiced concern about the right for individuals to freely express their opinions about the current electoral race. But when pressed on the issue, they said it was primarily President Kabila they did not feel free to criticize. Most students felt that they could criticize parliamentary or provincial candidates without concern, but they believed that only the

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presidential election was important.

Concerns About the Voting and Election Processes

¶17. (SBU) Some students called for a formal census before elections. Others voiced concern that the Independent Electoral Commission (CEI) had set the election date for July 30 without a "consultation" process. Students questioned the right of any group to push the date of the elections beyond the Sun City deadline of June 30. However, most students seemed not to want to delay the elections any further at this point. Some faulted the international community for not doing more to prepare the Congolese for elections and the post-electoral period.

The Electoral Law

¶18. (SBU) Many students felt that in drafting the electoral laws and the new constitution the international community had forced through certain provisions. When asked, however, most students said they had not actually read the constitution or electoral laws and relied on what they had heard on the street or read in the newspapers.

Comment

¶19. (SBU) Comment: These fora were all well attended and discussions were lively and often heated. Students relished the chance to express their opinions in the presence of U.S. diplomats. That university administrators facilitated frank exchanges showed the admittedly skeptical students that there is a growing commitment in the country to democratic give-and-take and transparency. University students are of the Congolese generation that has known only Mobutu, war, and a 16-year "transition to democracy." Their skepticism is not surprising, but makes them vulnerable to spoilers,

especially the UDPS. While we spoke with only a small number of students in a self-selecting audience more prone to express contrarian views, the groups were representative enough to demonstrate clearly that there is a critical lack of accurate election information available to Congolese voters. End comment.

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